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ABSTRACT

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the relationship between siblings is its diversity. Sibling relationships differ from peer relationships because of their frequency and amount or interaction; the durability of the relationships; the existence of prescribed roles; accessibility; and the degree of common experience. Conflict between siblings in early childhood may be rivalrous, but it is more productive to emphasize the learning to handle conflicts in the very early years. Affection, reassurance, and companionship are frequently but not always concomitants of conflict in the preschool years. Sibling rivalry does not disappear in middle childhood, although these children increasingly have friends who are important to them and have an arena other than the family in which to establish themselves. In adolescence, sibling relationships are powerfully influenced in the areas of achievement and success; sexuality and beauty; and social relations with peers, outsiders, and other siblings. It is during late childhood and adolescence, when the forging of adult sexual identity becomes a primary task, that siblings have the greatest influence on one another. Although the parents play the primary role in influencing the child's sexual identity, siblings can have some effect on how the individuals complete their development. Relationships between siblings can be considered dysfunctional when they prevent the developmental progress of the children or interfere with family functioning consistently over a long period. Intervention and non-intervention in sibling disputes by parents both have their problems. The best results occur when parents are at ease with their own sexuality, have a good sexual relationship and keep communication channels open. (ABL)

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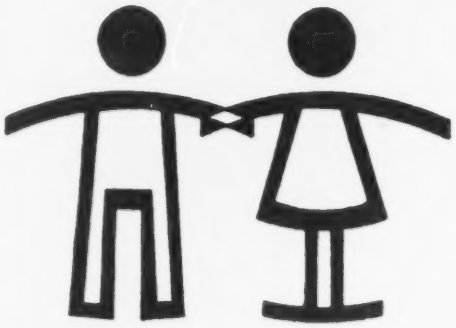

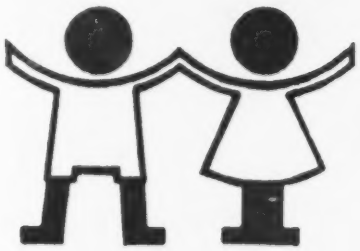

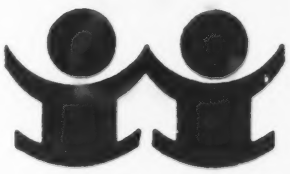

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THE SIBLING BOND

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THE SIBLING BOND. SIBLING CONFLICT AND SEXUALITY.

June Martin Family Therapist

Most of us grow up in families which are more or less stable groups. These range from single parent, one child families to large extended groups, including grand parents and maybe uncles and aunts. Many factors determine the development of a child's personality - factors stemming from the society in which the family is embedded, those from the family group itself and temperament and constitution which are fundamental to the individual child.

In this very complex picture, family influences play an enormously important part. The relationship of the child with its parents has been the basic building block of major theories of personality development. (Rappoport, 1972). Emphasis has been placed on the primacy of the mother child relationship, with the father child relationship gaining strength as a direct influence as the child progresses through infancy (Skynner, 1982). The role of siblings in the development of individual identity has been given little attention, but interest in the nature and importance of sibling relationships has grown in more recent times. This paper will look at sibling bonds as they develop in the family - their nature and the influence they have on the children involved. It will concentrate on two areas of interaction which strike a heartfelt response in most parents as they try to guide their children through the pleasures and perils of growing up together. These are: sibling conflict and rivalry and sibling sexuality.

As a general background, let us look briefly at the nature of the sibling bond.

THE NATURE OF THE SIBLING BOND

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the relationship between siblings is its diversity; any parent with two or more children will know how intensely one sibling can relate to another, how this can be with intense affection as well as with intense hostility. Parents will often remark with some puzzlement that one of their children does not seem attached to his or her brothers and sisters, or that they have one inseparable pair, or one constantly fighting pair with the other children seeming to go their own separate ways.

Certainly family life is conducive to the development of intense relationships and Bryant (1982) has outlined a number of dimensions along which sibling relationships differ from the bonds made with peers outside the family. These are:

1. The frequency and amount of interaction.
2. The durability of the relationships.
3. The existence of prescribed roles.
4. Accessibility.
5. The degree of common experience.

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Focussing briefly on the durability of family relationships, one may quote from Banks and Kahn (1982) as they interview an eighty two year old woman, Rebecca, about her relationship with her equally elderly sister.

> Interviewer: "Did having a sister make a difference?"
> Rebecca. "Of course it makes a difference. I know I have a sister! She's my flesh and blood, and I don't even have to see her all the time. To have a brother, to have a sister .... To know they're just around - that's all I need to know. Our mother taught us to always share. When I got married, Lilian and her husband moved in with me and we all lived together for thirteen years". (p3).

This is a vivid example of a very durable, one might even say enmeshed relationship, and there are many others. But equally one can cite examples of sibling relationships which have withered and have little importance to family members as they move into their individual lives.

Though common sense suggests that the experience in common, the degree of accessibility and the frequency and amount of interaction found in family life will all lead to relationships more intense than those with non-family members, one must take into account the immense variability of family style and structure. Families develop very different rules about who interacts with whom and when.

As a family therapist, well accustomed to observing behaviour in families, I have been amazed at the consistent patterning of communication in the consulting room. I hasten to add that this occurs in functional families perhaps experiencing a developmental crisis as well as those more seriously disturbed. For example, a family of four - mother, father, daughter aged 14 and son aged 12, was referred because of a recent outbreak of constant fighting between the children. In the sessions, whenever the parents were faced with talking together about a big career move for father, the son reached over and pinched or prodded his sister. She retaliated and an escalating fight drew the family's attention away from the big issue of whether father would take up a job which would mean his travelling away from his family for long periods.

Other examples of the way events in the family influence interaction could be cited. A not uncommon situation is that of two siblings, thrown on each other's resources by the birth of a difficult baby, who requires mother's constant attention over a long period. A common result is the development of a habit which could be described as a rule, such that the two older children band together for support and become very close while the youngest is isolated. This can remain the situation throughout childhood and long after the original situation has disappeared. Such rules about how siblings relate to each other are frequent and can easily become entrenched.

If children differ in gender and in age by a number of years their degree of interaction and indeed the commonality of their experience, as well as their accessibility to each other, may be minimal. Banks and Kahn (1982) have this to say about such siblings whom they term "low access"

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> "They are often separated by more than eight or ten years, acting almost like members of different generations. They have shared little time, space or personal history, partaking of different schools, friends and parents (since people are different parents at different ages) in very different ways. They lack the sense of a shared history. They have not needed one another nor have their parents needed for them to need each other". (p10).

The existence of prescribed roles in families is another factor which influences the nature of the relationships between family members. This notion is widely accepted by most thinkers interested in family dynamics. What it means is that by some sort of unspoken agreement in the family, children are assigned and collude in playing out certain fixed roles. How often have we heard parents describing a child as "the responsible one", "mother's little helper", "the stirrer", "the family clown", "the go-getter", etc. When the children in the family play out these prescribed roles, patterns of behaviour among parents and siblings become fixed in a way that does not usually happen in extra-familial groups to the same extent. It is not infrequent for children moving out into other groups to try to assume the same role as they have in the family, but group pressures are diverse and frequently do not support this particular behaviour. Among brothers and sisters fixed patterns of behaviour are reinforced in the family in a way that seldom happens in extra familial peer groups.

So, while families can provide special conditions for the forging of strong bonds between siblings - bonds of an intensity not often found elsewhere - it is clear that not all siblings experience family conditions which lead to such relationships. It is perhaps a jolt to our comfortable assumptions about the strength of familial bonds, to realise that there is great individual variation, and that one must look to family constellation, family rules and roles as well as to individual temperament for an understanding of their diversity.

THE SIBLING BOND IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

We are all aware of the problems associated with the birth of a sibling, but few of us are capable of the detailed analysis, described in Dunn's report (1984) of a study, which involved brothers and sisters from earliest infancy to middle childhood. Their mothers were also included in the study. She found that most first-born children exhibited that ambivalence toward the new baby, which characterises sibling relationships at all stages of childhood and adolescence. Direct hostility to the newborn was infrequent, but deliberate naughtiness and aggression towards the mother increased three-fold in the first two or three weeks after the birth. It is tempting to pick up the theme of rivalry for the mother's attention and this subject will be dealt with at a later stage; but Dunn wishes to focus on the interest and emotional involvement of the very young child with it's new born sibling.

As the children grow older "they not only co-operate in games and show physical affection for one another, they often show concern at the other's distress and make practical attempts to help and comfort". (p 28). This is not to deny the presence of aggression between very young siblings, particularly as they move into the toddler and preschool years, but it suggests that, at least in some families, there develops an attachment "a relationship in which one child provides a secure base for the other, is missed when absent, and is used as a source of comfort and security". (p 22).

There are some children who are usually friendly to their siblings, rarely showing aggression, and others who are predominantly aggressive. Many children show both frequent affection and frequent hostility to their siblings; indeed this may well indicate that the relationship between them is progressing in a functional way. Dunn (1984) emphasises the constructive role of conflict between young children, suggesting that it both reflects and promotes the growth of understanding between them while providing a context within which they may begin to learn the social rules of their family.

By the time children are eighteen months old most have progressed from bursting into tears when pushed by an older sibling to hitting back. Many, indeed, are the first to hit or pull hair, and create a dilemma for their older siblings who are aware they they should not hurt 'the baby', even though that 'baby' is becoming an increasingly effective fighter. The younger child also begins to understand how best to hurt the older one. Dunn says "in their relationships with their siblings children display powers of understanding far greater than those attributed to them on the basis of experimental studies". (p 41). Given that young children are frequently competing for the love of a parent, one can understand how important it is for them to be able to predict the behaviour and feelings of their rivals, to know their weak spots and to recognise their moods. Conflict situations are fertile ground for the development of such powers of understanding. Pretend play also plays a part. Children as young as two are capable of entering a fantasy world with their older brothers and sisters, assuming family and other roles, and such interaction promotes social understanding.

Abramovitch, Carter and Lando (1979) observed the interaction of preschool siblings in their homes rather than in the laboratory. They report a high level of rich and varied interaction, both pro-social (sharing, asking politely, comfort, physical affection, laughing, smiling) and what they term agonistic (physical aggression, fighting over objects and verbal aggression such as commanding, insulting, threatening). They conclude that there is more aggression than laboratory studies have indicated but that sibling interaction is not based predominantly on rivalry.

Banks and Kahn (1982) have this to say about rivalry:-

> "One child can rival another for the love or the money of a parent, for a friend's interest, for a prized family role. But many forms of sibling aggression are not rivalrous; in them the payoff is not the possession of something the other cannot have; but rather the payoff is internal having to do with a forbidden satisfaction or the fulfilment of a deeper emotional need". (p 197).

While one can accept that aggression can spring from many causes, it is difficult not to emphasise rivalry in the early years, when the child's world is bound by it's parents and family. The ambivalence and hostility expressed by first born towards siblings certainly supports this view. Dunn quotes a four year old as saying to his mother on the birth of his brother:- "Why have you ruined my life?" (p 63).

Rather than attempting futiley to tease out the extent to which conflict is rivalrous, it is more productive to emphasise that learning to handle conflicts in the very early years is a valuable beginning to learning to live in a competitive world. It is also important to reiterate that affection, reassurance and companionship are frequently but not always concomitants of conflict in the preschool years.

But what happens as the toddlers progress through their early years to reach middle childhood?

THE SIBLING BOND IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Rappoport (1972) sees middle childhood, which he defines as the years between 6 and 12, as a superficially undramatic time during which children integrate aspects of their personality partially developed in their earlier years. He states that "the global critical event of this period - movement beyond the family carries the child into novel, challenging, sometimes literally dangerous domains of experience with peers, school and mass media". (p 267).

How does this expansion of their world impact on the relationships between siblings in a family? As early as 3 or 4 children are increasingly able to identify themselves as different from their parents and siblings. By the age of 6, siblings have become objects for more conscious comparison and identification. (Banks and Kahn, 1982; Pfouts, 1976). Because children in this 6-12 age group increasingly have friends who are important to them and have an arena other than the family in which to establish themselves, some of the heat of rivalry with siblings is dispersed. As least most children have more choice about whom they will identify with, and with whom they will be close.

Yet this growing separateness does not mean that sibling rivalry disappears. Children, consolidating their self-concept, compare themselves with close siblings in such characteristics as gender, age, intelligence, physical appearance, health or emotional strengths and weaknesses. As Banks and Kahn put it:- "set against the back drop of parental ideals, wishes, values and projections, young siblings begin to 'eyeball' each other for those attributes that are desirable or undesirable". (p 52). While this process of social comparison can be constructive in helping the child to decide on how he or she wishes to be, it clearly provides grounds for considerable conflict and jealousy.

In summary then, jealousy between siblings stems from any number of issues in a very complex situation. In middle childhood, as children establish themselves in a context of peers outside the family, some issues of rivalry may be defused; but there remain frustrated dependency needs, emotional struggles involving sibling anger and identity, and competition for parental and extra-familial recognition and approval. (Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 1982). It is interesting to note that siblings who relate affectionately, share frequently and seldom fight, can be extremely jealous of each other's relationship with the parents and, conversely, siblings who continually fight are not necessarily jealous of parental affection. One thing that most people agree on is that jealousy does not dissipate easily, and this is evidenced by the way even old people in counselling situations speak with wry amusement and with pain about their jealousy towards a brother or sister.

The concerns of middle childhood have not been studied as frequently or as deeply as have the stages of infancy and adolescence, so that research into sibling relationships at this time has been scanty. Bryant (1982) acknowledges this lack, but suggests that at this stage, brothers and sisters, while still locked into ambivalent relationships, increasingly view each other as sources of facilitation and support. She says:-

> "siblings then may provide an important, relatively enduring context in which they have the sustained opportunity to develop successful control of aggressive motivation, and sibling exchanges during middle childhood appear to reflect this issue and distinguish it from parent-child exchanges" (p111).

Sibling relationships in childhood are thus seen as important in providing the context for the ongoing development of the ego and the sense of identity. As the child moves into adolescence these issues crystallize as core development tasks. What happens to sibling relationships during adolescence? How important are they in influencing development?

THE SIBLING BOND DURING ADOLESCENCE

Ross and Milgram (1982) have suggested that during adolescence and adulthood, sibing relationships are powerfully influential in the following three areas:-

> Achievement and success.
> Sexuality and beauty.
> Social relations with peers, outsiders and other siblings.

These three areas do not operate separately and should be thought of as in dynamic balance with one another. (Banks and Kahn. 1982). Siblings vie with each other for dominance in these areas and if one sibling clearly shines in one area, others tend to strive for superiority in the territory that is left. It seldom happens that one sibling is clearly superior in all three areas over a long period of time. When it does happen, an excluded child will feel inadequate and a nobody. Banks and Kahn cite the case of two brothers. Eric, the older who achieved high academic honours but was superficial in his social and sexual relationships, and Frank, who was vocationally much less successful but, because of his outstanding charm was loved by friends and especially by women, who sought him out. Eric developed the identity of a high powered success but a social loser, while Frank gained the identity of social winner but vocational loser.

This dynamic balance, dysfunctional for both, did not arrive overnight in their adulthood, but evolved over many shared years of childhood and adolescence. Another important factor in the struggle for superiority between two siblings is their gender. In the context of sex-role expectations of excellence for men and average performance for women, it is particularly difficult for a family to handle a situation where a younger sister outstrips an older brother in academic and vocational achievement. It is not infrequent for the girl to play down or even hide her success lest she overshadow an older male who is expected to be her superior.

The issue of sexuality among siblings will be discussed at length in a later section of the paper. At this point, it will suffice to stress that in adolescence the need for superiority over one's sibling peaks. The result can be an escalation of verbal attacks designed to wound and defeat one's brother or sister. There is no more vulnerable area for adolescents that their emerging sexuality and an attack will invariably find a target. However, it would be a mistake to label all constant hostility as a weapon in the cause of superiority. Hostility creates distance, and this distance is often necessary for adolescents coming to terms with hetero- and homosexual attractions to siblings.

Siblings compete for superiority in relationships with friends as well as with other siblings, and there must be a loser whenever a pair is competing for the affection of a third, whether a friend, brother or sister. Many adults recall with pain and bitterness, their exclusion by two siblings or a sibling and a prized friend. These wounds can have lasting effects on the adult's ease in making friends. The rivalry and hostility between adolescent siblings is an important part of their relationship but one must not overlook the warmth and support which they frequently give each other. There are big pressures on family systems as the children reach adolescence and ally themselves against their parents. Even children who have fought constantly all their lives will submerge their differences and support each other in a common adolescent striving for independence. Lamb (1982) striking a positive note concludes that

> "during adolescence when parents and children often have difficulty communicating about emotionally laden issues such as sexuality and the use of recreational drugs, and friends of both sexes prove fickle and unpredictable, siblings provide the most reliable and consistently supportive relationships". (p5.).

SEXUALITY AND SIBLINGS

Just as hostility between siblings is a complex and difficult area in families, so is sexuality. Text books of human development seldom approach the subject of the sexual aspects of sibling relationships in any depth, yet any observer of families knows well how pervasive are both the sexual influence of siblings on one another and the sexual tensions between them. We shall look at these two aspects separately, beginning with sexual influence.

THE SEXUAL INFLUENCE OF SIBLINGS ON ONE ANOTHER

It is during late childhood and adolescence, when the forging of adult sexual identity becomes a primary task, that siblings have the greatest influence on one another. However, patterms of identification and rivalry originating in early childhood can determine the way in which one sibling influences the sexual development of another. Banks and Kahn (1982) describe the case of two sisters, Betty and Sherry. Sherry, the elder, was from babyhood beautiful, charming and outgoing: characteristics which were much praised by everyone. Betty was a plain, gawky baby, and grew into a shy, ungainly child celebrated for her intelligence. During childhood the sisters and their family emphasised their differences, and each rigidly differentiated herself from the other. Very early in Sherry's adolescence her beauty began to attract boys, and she quickly moved into a sexual precocity and later on to numerous affairs, many of which were disastrous. Betty, true to her need to be different from Sherry, refused all dates and though she grew to be very attractive, threw herself into an academic career which left little time for an active social and sexual life. It was not until she was twenty six that she could acknowledge that what Sherry had sought, namely love, might be worth having. The sisters opened up to each other and developed a mutually supportive relationship which helped both to a more satisfactory sexual adjustment.

Same sex siblings who identify with each other and do not have to differentiate so rigidly, can help consolidate each other's sexual identity by reinforcing each other's sexual object preference, behavioural style, gender expressiveness and sexual feelings. It is usually the younger siblings who model themselves on older siblings and imitate their way of dressing, the way they speak, and follow similar activities.

Opposite sex siblings also influence sexual development as it unfolds during childhood and adolescence. Girls will often identify with a loved older brother and wish to be as like him as possible until at adolescence they are overcome with their need to be and appear to be female. If they are lucky, this change of attitude can be facilitated by identifying with an older sister; but the brother can still be a powerful force, advising his sister about how to behave on dates, and confiding in her about his experiences. Both same and opposite sex siblings can be important in helping each other to learn about sexuality but it must be remembered that the parents play the primary role in influencing the child's sexual identity. Siblings can but tip the scale and have some effect on how the individual completes his or her sexual development.

Before concluding this section on sibling sexual influence, let us look briefly at the process of sexual pioneering. This term is used when one sibling blazes a trail in sexual development. Usually, but not always, the oldest sibling is the pioneer paving the way by lowering parental resistance. Same sex siblings can react by positive identification, modelling and perhaps idealization, but they can, like Betty quoted above, rigidly differentiate themselves in a destructive way.

Sexual pioneering can be gradual and socially acceptable, establishing family norms for dating 'going steady' etc., or it can be the source of painful family conflict when the adolescent pushes the boundaries of family acceptance too far. Functional families customarily revise their family rules as the first child reaches adolescence, but many factors are operating at this time. Not only is the child exploring the twin issues of independence and sexual identity before the interested eyes of brothers and sisters, but within the parents too, unfinished business concerning their own independence and sexuality may well be reactivated. Sibling influences are but one factor in this complicated situation.

Emphasis has been put on same sex sibling influence, but Lamb (1982) suggests that cross sex relationships can, particularly in adolescence, provide an important affectional base when he says:-

> "Besides marital relationships, sibling relationships are often the only heterosexual relationships in which western adults can express affection and closeness without eliciting disapprobation and gossip. Heterosexual sibling relationships may be especially important in adolescent and early adulthood when long term sexual commitments are being explored for the first time". (p 6).

Good cross sex sibling relations can provide stability at a time when extra-familial relationships are on shifting sands.

SEXUALITY BETWEEN BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Sexual attraction between brothers and sisters has long been recognised and even immortalized in our mythology and literature. Wagner in his opera, The Ring of the Nibelung (1870), relates the story of Siegmund and Sieglinde, brother and sister who fell in love, and after one night of passion are cruelly separated by the slaying of Siegmund. Such a terrible fate is a typical outcome in tales of incestuous love, though there are exceptions as in the case of the Pharoahs of Ancient Egypt who were expected to marry their sisters as a sacred privilege. The tragedy of such stories serves to reinforce the centuries' old taboos and consolidate our horror of incest. But incest, like many other forms of sexual behaviour, is being re-examined in this sexually permissive age, and recent films and books, such as John Irving's 'The Hotel New Hampshire (1981), view incest in a less tragic light. In this book, a brother and sister indulge in a rapturous sexual episode, a culmination of years of sexual tension and a close loving relationship between them. According to the book, this experience frees them to pursue committed sexual relationships outside the family.

Although in clinical literature one occasionally reads an account of sibling incest which has been fulfilling and not harmful, the weight of evidence and opinion suggests that sibling incest has damaging rather benign effects.

Incest is an extreme aspect of sexuality between brother and sister. Other aspects include playful curiosity, love and oedipal involvement. (Banks and Kahn, 1982).

PLAYFUL CURIOSITY

There is general agreement that boys and girls develop sexual curiosity very early in life. T. Berry Brazelton (1974) describes a mother who happened upon her thirty month old son with two other little boys, thus:

> "He was hiding behind a pair of bushes with two other boys of his own age. They had pulled down their pants and were investigating each other's penis. They were saying 'I'm the doctor, you lie down' and 'What's that doctor?', as they pointed out their belly buttons and genitalia. Most giggling came out when Joe pointed to another boy's anus and buttocks and said 'Here's your bum!'" (pp 204-5).

These very young children are still pre-occupied with bodily functions, so recently brought under their control. By the time they are five or six, their perceptions of sex differences have expanded and they are usually more secure in their 'maleness' or 'femaleness'. Their sexual curiosity and play is centred round differences rather than similarities.

When does sexual play, generally agreed to be natural and inevitable (Arnstein, 1974, Pincus and Dare, 1978) become a matter for concern? Finkelhor (1980) defines sex play as

> "activities of young children of the same age, engaged in mutually showing and touching of genitals that are limited to short periods of time" (p 172).

It is damaging only if the parents see it as dirty or shameful, and this includes activities both within and without the family.

SIBLING LOVE

If children's development proceeds normally, other preoccupations take over as they move into school and peer groups. But it is a mistake to think that sexual curiosity and interest go away in this 'latency' period. Under benign family conditions, it is not a dominant factor, though T.V. and films bombard children with sexual stimulation, constantly titillating their sexual curiosity. There is a developing awareness among clinical workers that sexual activity can continue through these childhood years, and that one cannot overlook the school as a place where sexual abuse can occur. Among siblings, sexual embroilments seldom occur if there is adequate parenting, that is if there is no deficit in the emotional responsiveness and the emotional availability of the parents. Banks and Kahn (1982) are firmly convinced, on the evidence of their intensive studies of siblings, that when parents fail their children in this way, they, the children, bond together too strongly and this overstrong bond easily becomes sexualized. Pincus and Dare (1978) agree that "children resort to sexual expression of their feelings when they have disappointment and loss in their early and current life." (p 82).

SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION AND INCEST

Reliable evidence about the incidence and nature of sexual behaviour between siblings is hard to come by. There is widespread agreement that the expression of incestuous feelings is more common among siblings than between parent and child. Finkelhor (1979) in a study of 796 college students found that 19.2 percent of females and 8.6 percent males claimed that as children they had been sexually victimized.

Sexual victimization was defined as any significant sexual contact, ranging from intercourse to prolonged oral and genital contact. This behaviour differed from normal mutual sexual play in that the contact was between an older person and a younger 'victim' child. 39 percent of girls and 21 percent of boys reported that their experiences had been with siblings. These figures are likely to be an underestimation as many people are unwilling or unable to talk about such childhood incidents even if they have not suppressed the memory.

EFFECTS OF SIBLING SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

There is widespread agreement among clinicians that adult relationships are adversely affected by previous incestuous experience between brothers and sisters. (Pincus and Dare, 1978, Banks and Kahn, 1982). The latter maintain that sibling incest is more likely to have long term ill effects on sisters than on brothers. If the incestuous relationship takes place in preadolescence the results are likely to be more serious and traumatic.

> "Sibling incest in preadolescents, generally has a crippling effect. It is in this stage that a child is consciously dealing with the first stirrings of puberty, sexual feelings and physical change. These feelings can be confusing, mysterious and delightful but they can also induce guilt. Sexual entanglement between brothers and sisters at this point can have powerful and longlasting effects on a person's sexual identity". (Banks and Kahn, p. 169).

AGGRESSION IN SIBLING SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Where as some sexualised relationships between siblings grow out of love and excessive bonding, others provide a way of exercising aggressive power. While some older sisters can force their brothers in an aggressive and humiliating way to have sex with them, it is more likely that older brothers will behave in this way towards sisters. Some brothers, struggling to achieve 'manliness' choose this way of gaining sexual mastery over younger sisters. It is not unusual to encounter cases where brothers seeking status in their peer groups, bring friends round and offer their sister as a sexual object. Even when actual sexual contact does not take place, the girl will feel betrayed, and humiliated, and may suffer long term damage as a result.

PARENTAL INFLUENCES

The aim of this paper has been to explore the relationship between siblings, and so parental influences have not been emphasized. Yet it is true to say that in many important ways parents orchestrate the ways in which their children interact.

One way in which parents help to pattern the way in which children relate to each other is by the assignation of certain roles within the family group. At least part of this process is determined by the scripts of family life which the parents carry in their heads. Some derive directly from their experience in their families of origin and some have been handed down over many generations. For instance, Byng-Hall (1982) talks about family legends such as one member being 'the black sheep'. Combined with old adages like 'blood will out' or 'it's lurking in the blood', the presence of such labels in the family's mythology makes it highly probable that a 'black sheep' will turn up in each generation. As Byng-Hall says:

> "Scanning the present family cast in order to spot the next villain becomes a powerful mechanism in self-fulfilling prophecy" (p 214).

When a particular child is so labelled, perhaps on the basis of physical resemblance or as a result of some episode of behaviour, it is very hard for him or her to escape from the role and other children in the family become locked into rigid ways of relating to that child.

Parents also anticipate the nature of sibling relationships on the basis of their own experience in their families of origin. If they have had close, friendly relationships with brothers and sisters, they will want the same for their children. If their relationships have been cold and hostile, they will want better things for their children, but it will be hard for them to throw off the expectations developed over many years of childhood; such parents are likely to give their children mixed messages which result in confusion in their relationships with each other.

On another level, it may be said that parents unconsciously project aspects of their personalities onto their children. As Banks and Kahn point out:

> "Each child ultimately absorbs a unique blend of what the parents hate and love about themselves. The sibling relationship no less than any other relationship in the family, is in part determined by these projections and wishes" (p 24).

Two types of family system spring to mind because they frequently present to a family therapist.

In the first, the father is unable to acknowledge or express his anger; his son, however, continually disrupts that family with his angry outbursts and provocative behaviour.

In the second it is the mother who cannot accept her own sexuality, but has an adolescent daughter who is sexually delinquent. The children's behaviour can be seen as partly determined by the same sex parent's projection of unacceptable aspects of their personality. Children can be delegated to act out parental wish fulfillments.

Such families are dysfunctional but with help can frequently solve their problems and learn new ways of relating. The question of when a family is dysfunctional is an important one. Lewis (1979) has made a study of functional families, and has distinguished between adequate and optimal functioning. About 60 percent of families fall into the adequate range but exhibit rigidity and overcontrol in their relationships as opposed to flexibility and sharing within the frame work of a strong parental coalition. The latter is characteristic of optimal functioning. Both can produce 'healthy' children.

Relationships between siblings can be considered dysfunctional when they prevent the developmental progress of the children or interfere with family functioning consistently over a long period. Parents would do well to seek help when the behaviour is beyond their problem solving skills and is becoming entrenched.

GENETIC INFLUENCES

Scarr and Grajek (1982) point out that parents provide both genes and rearing environments to their children. This paper has touched on some aspects of the rearing environment in discussing parental influences but has not mentioned such variables as birth order, child spacing and sex of siblings because they have not emerged as good predictors of sibling interaction. (Sutton-Smith, 1982, Dunn, 1984). Genetic theory suggests that biological siblings differ physically and behaviourally because on average they share only half their genes; some siblings resemble each other more that others because they share relatively more of their genes. How children relate to each other will have some basis in fit or misfit, due to genetic similarities or differences. But as well, parents respond to children differently depending on behaviour that is partly genetically determined. For instance, a boisterous, challenging, untidy boy will evoke a different parental response than will a quiet, self-contained, orderly brother. Scarr and Grajek assert that genetic differences help to determine different rearing environments which in turn heighten the variability in sibling behaviours.

The foregoing discussion skims lightly over some of the ways in which parents influence their children's behaviour and the relationships between them. Despite its superficiality, it does highlight the complexity of the many factors determining such relationships. Researchers in the field have to keep in mind that all these factors are operating in interaction within a family system and their task is a daunting one.

Fortunately parents do not have to understand the full range of complexities before they can be good parents. As well as weaknesses, most families have strengths which enable them to tackle their problems and promote the adequate development of their members. Nevertheless, parents can use all the help they can get in acquiring the basic skills which enable them to do their job.

The following section of the paper is devoted to some suggestions which might help parents, particularly in the area of sibling conflict and sibling sexuality.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Firstly with regard to developing functional family relationships, parents can put effort into a number of areas:

1. They can encourage the development of trust and reaching out as opposed to distrust and withdrawal.

2. They can allow their children to be individuals, to have some separateness and autonomy in keeping with their age.

3. They can try to form a firm parental coalition, sharing power while keeping control of the children flexible and negotiable.

4. They can make sure that their communication with the children is open and clear, thus serving as models in this area.

These are some of the areas which Lewis (1979) found important in his study of functional families).

PARENTS AS MANAGERS OF SIBLING CONFLICT

To begin on an encouraging note: Newson and Newson 1974-76) have extensively studied both pre-school children and those in middle childhood. They found that 64 percent of children were reported to fight sometimes or often with siblings and only 32 percent with other children. For parents concerned about the in-family fighting, they assert that "the crucial point is that while the fighting that they witness in their home is worse than anything they see in the streets and play ground or in other people's homes, it is almost certainly not worse than the fighting that takes place in the privacy of family life in these other homes". (Newson and Newson in Dunn, 1984, p 103). Further, it is important to re-emphasize the positive function of aggression as noted earlier in this paper. An additional point made by Banks and Kahn is that

> "aggression, while it may be painful, represents contact, warmth, another presence". (p 198).

Before they can deal comfortably with their children's fighting, parents need to be aware of any difficulties they might have with their own aggression. They need also to have a stable value system by which to settle sibling disputes. Discipline in this area is most effective when parents are united in this value system and cannot be split by children. Single parents, while disadvantaged by not having the support of a partner, can operate effectively by knowing clearly what behaviour they are prepared to accept, and by communicating this clearly and consistently to their squabbling children.

TO INTERVENE OR NOT TO INTERVENE

Over recent years the bulk of advice given to parents has been against intervention. But this course of action has its problems. Firstly, as Dunn suggests, many parents are unable to stand back while their children are fighting and hurting each other; it goes against their nature and causes them serious upset. Their most effective intervention is a firm consistent prohibition of the behaviour and an explanation of the consequences of aggression and unkindness towards the other person, while at the same time expressing love and warmth towards the offending child or children. Secondly, parents need to be careful that non-intervention is not giving the green light for one sibling to persecute and hurt another. Sometimes parents encourage one child's aggression towards another while overtly maintaining a non-interventionist stance. This may stem from a parent's unacknowledged dislike of the victim child. It is difficult to deal with such a situation but a careful monitoring of what is happening with the children as well as a self examining attitude on the part of the parents will often provide a solution. It is important for parents to acknowledge to themselves that they have all sorts of feelings towards their children, liking some more than others.

There is no need to feel guilty, and parents who are most effective are those who can acknowledge their feelings as one factor in an overall situation - one factor among a number which need to be modified.

Banks and Kahn describe effective parents thus:

> "Effective parents are able to use their power to enforce rules and administer consequences for violent and abusive behaviour; but they also possess a finely tuned sense of when to intervene and when to let the children work it out themselves and are able to distinguish between a humiliating attack and a ritual harassment" (p 202).

They maintain that when parents intervene unwisely, they can damage the development of problem solving skills in children and adolescents.

FAVOURITISM

Favouritism seems to be part and parcel of family life. It can be destructive if one child becomes especially entitled in a family in which parents are unaware of what they are doing. However in most families, parents make great efforts to balance favours. Children receive attention and praise for different characteristics. They are favourites at different times on different days or different periods of their lives. Some parents particularly like a certain stage of development-love pre-schoolers but do not relate as easily to primary school children - empathise more with adolescents than they do with babies. Given the basic good will and affection which most parents have towards their children, this variability in attitude contributes to that flexibility in family relationships which Lewis (1979) sees as part of optimal functioning. It is only when rigid patterns set in that parents and children are in trouble.

SIBLING SEXUALITY. WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Banks and Kahn (1982) have this advice for parents:

> "Parents need to be aware that sexual curiosity between brothers and sisters is natural - but curiosity can easily lead to play, and play can lead to love and incest. Incest is more likely to occur if there is parental neglect or abandonment, so that brothers and sisters begin to need each other for solace, nurturance and identity, or as a vehicle to express rage and hurt" (p 195).

So parents can best guard against sexual involvement between their children by providing warm nurturance and emotional availability.

Children need also to be given information about sex, but information that is suitable for the child's stage of development. In many cases young children up to the age of five or so, ask questions quite casually; questions such as "Why doesn't Janie have a penis? How did the baby get into mummy's tummy?". A short answer specific to the question, will most likely satisfy the child. Indeed, the parent who earnestly sets out to explain the facts of life is apt to be left in mid-sentence as the child loses interest and wants to go and play.

Older children require more factual information and adolescents experiencing a surge of sexual feeling and physical development need more complex handling. They both want and fear sexual freedom and so both desire and reject limits put on their sexual experimentation by parents (Skynner, 1982).

The best results occur when parents are at ease with their own sexuality, have a good sexual relationship and keep communication channels open between themselves and their children. If there are clear messages about caring and about sexuality among the multitude of accepting and rejecting messages common in adult-adolescent relationships, siblings are unlikely to act out their sexual feelings towards each other. As Pincus and Dare assert, "loving relationships between family members can be enjoyed despite their erotic components." (p. 89).

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